Theories of Learning

**William G. Perry**

William G. Perry was an educational researcher at Harvard University. He developed an account of the cognitive and intellectual development of college-age students through a fifteen-year study of students at Harvard and Radcliffe in the 1950s and 1960s. Perry generalizes that study to give a more detailed account of post-adolescent development than did Piaget. He also introduces the concept of positionality, and develops a less static view of developmental transitions.

**Positions and Transitions**

The sequence of cognitive structures that make up the developmental process may be described in terms of cross-sections of cognitive structures representative of different stages in the developmental sequence. Each stage is construed as a relatively stable, enduring cognitive structure, which includes and builds upon past structures. Stages are characterized by the coherence and consistency of the structures that compose them. The transition between stages is mediated by less stable, less consistent transitional structures. Freud, [Whitehead](http://gsi.berkeley.edu/teachingguide/theories/figures.html#whitehead), and [Piaget](http://gsi.berkeley.edu/teachingguide/theories/piaget.html) all use the notion of a stage in this way.

Perry rejects the notion of a stage. He argues that construing development in terms of a sequence of stable stages in which students are “imprisoned” is too static (Perry 1999, xii). Instead, he introduces the notion of a position. Perry accepted Piaget's claim that learners adapt and develop by assimilating and accommodating new information into existing cognitive structures. He also accepted Piaget's claim that the sequence of cognitive structures that constitute the developmental process are both logically and hierarchically related, insofar as each builds upon and thus presupposes the previous structure. However, he laid far greater emphasis on the idea that learners approach knowledge from a variety of different standpoints. Thus, according to Perry, gender, race, culture, and socioeconomic class influence our approach to learning just as much as our stage of cognitive development (xii). We each interpret the world from a different position (46) and each person may occupy several positions simultaneously with respect to different subjects and experiences (xii). The developmental process is a constantly changing series of transitions between various positions.

**Duality, Multiplicity, and Commitment**

Perry identifies nine basic positions, of which the three major positions are duality, multiplicity, and commitment.

The most basic position is duality. The world, knowledge and morality are assumed to have a dualistic structure. Things are right or wrong, true or false, good or bad. Students see teachers as authority figures who impart right answers and "the truth." The role of the student is seen as being to receive those answers and demonstrate that they have learned them. Detachment is difficult in this because there is only a single, correct point of view. Most students have passed beyond this stage by the time that they arrive in university.

Those who have not quickly do so in the inherently pluralistic culture of modern universities.

* Positions two through four are largely transitional. Learners gradually develop an increased recognition of multiplicity but still assimilate that multiplicity to the fundamentally dualistic framework of the first position. For instance, a student may recognize the existence of a multiplicity of different points of view in the university but still look for the point of view that the teacher “wants us to learn” (121).
* The next major position is multiplicity. The world, knowledge and morality are accepted as relativistic in the sense that truth is seen as relative to a frame of reference rather than absolute. Learners recognize that things can only be said to be right or wrong within a specific context. Teachers are seen as expert guides or consultants rather than as authority figures who impart “the truth.” Peers are accepted as legitimate sources of learning (xxxii). This position involves a much more extensive restructuring of the learner's existing knowledge than previous positions as knowledge can no longer be assimilated to the existing dualistic organizational scheme.
* Positions six through eight are also largely transitional. Recognition of the relativity of knowledge leads to the realization that a stable locus or point of view is necessary for a sense of identity and to give some feeling of continuity. This leads to the gradual formation of commitments to certain points of view, relationships, sorts of activities, etc. The learner realizes the necessity to find his own point of view in a relativistic world. He or she begins by questioning and reconsidering past beliefs and commitments, then develops and expands upon firm commitments regarding important areas of life and knowledge.
* The final major position is commitment. The commitments that the learners have developed together with their recognition that all knowledge is relative, leads to the realization both that each person partly determines his or her own fate and the recognition that commitments, and hence identity, are constantly evolving.

Because Perry's initial research was based on a small and fairly non-representative sample of students, many of the details of his positions have been modified or developed by later researchers. However, the idea of positionality has had a significant influence on social identity theory and his account of developmental transitions is consonant with current approaches to adult learning (xii).

**Reference**

Perry, W.G. (1999). Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.